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AUTHOR Saarni, Carolyn
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ABSTRACT

Defining emotional competence as the demonstration of self-efficacy in emotion-eliciting social transactions, this paper presents a model of emotional competence that explores the factors and skills contributing to the development of a mature emotional response that supports an individual's social goals. The paper first describes the primary contributors to emotional competence, including the self or ego identity, moral sense, and developmental history. The paper then details eight skills that constitute emotional competence: (1) awareness of one's emotional state; (2) ability to discern others' emotions; (3) ability to describe emotions; (4) capacity to empathize with other's emotional experiences; (5) ability to realize the difference between inner emotional states and outward expression; (6) capacity for adaptive coping with aversive emotions; (7) awareness of the role of emotions in the structure of relationships; and (8) the capacity for emotional self-efficacy. Next, the paper distinguishes between theories of emotional competence and emotional intelligence. The paper concludes by discussing one of the consequences of emotional competence, the effective skill in managing one's emotions, which is considered critical to negotiating interpersonal exchanges. (JPB)

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A Skill-Based Model of Emotional Competence: A Developmental Perspective

Carolyn Saarni, Ph.D.

Department of Counseling, Sonoma State University

Rohnert Park, CA 94928

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Carolyn Saarni, Ph.D.
Department of Counseling, Sonoma State University
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My working definition of emotional competence is as follows: *Emotional competence is the demonstration of self-efficacy in emotion-eliciting social transactions* (Saarni, 1999). Self-efficacy is used here to mean that the individual believes that s/he has the confidence and skills to achieve a desired outcome. Just exactly what that desired outcome is will reflect cultural values and beliefs; however, those values and beliefs will have been transformed by the self into personal meanings. (Think of this like a unique fingerprint that the individual impresses upon cultural practices.)

When the notion of self-efficacy is applied to emotion-eliciting social transactions, we are talking about how people can respond emotionally, yet simultaneously and strategically apply their knowledge about emotions and their emotional expressiveness to relationships with others, such that they can negotiate their way through interpersonal exchanges and regulate their emotional experiences as well toward desired outcomes or goals. 'Desired outcomes or goals' for the emotionally competent individual will, by definition, be integrated with his/her moral character (or personal integrity). Mature emotional competence, as defined here, assumes that moral character and ethical values deeply influence one's emotional responses in ways that promote personal integrity. Mature emotional competence should reflect wisdom, and this wisdom carries with it the significant ethical values of one's culture.

Contributors to Emotional Competence

The primary contributors to emotional competence include one's *self or ego identity*, one's

moral sense, and one's *developmental history*. I will briefly discuss each of these in turn.

The self's role. The self functions to coordinate and mediate in an adaptive fashion the meaningfulness of the environment for the individual (for example, McAdams, 1996). A critical consequence of the self's role is that *values* are assigned to the context we are engaged in. When we differentially respond to the particular context facing us because of its relative significance to us, then we are also acting in a goal-directed fashion, and to be goal-directed is to function with motives vis à vis a particular context (Lazarus, 1991). It is in this sense that emotions are functional: They serve to goad us into action whereby we initiate, modify, maintain, or terminate our relationship to the particular circumstances we are engaged in (Campos, Mumme, Kermoian, & Campos, 1994). Self-efficacy is clearly served when adaptive goals are attained (Bandura, 1989).

The role of moral disposition. I make the assumption that if we are functioning in an emotionally adaptive and competent fashion, we are invariably also living in accord with our moral disposition, not necessarily, however, with our moral code or rules. The latter are quite frequently relativistic and change with development and context, but the former is embedded in such concepts as sympathy, self-control, fairness, and a sense of obligation (Campbell & Christopher, 1996; Flanagan, 1991; Wilson, 1993). Personal integrity comes with a life lived in accord with one's moral sense or disposition, and concomitantly, such a life reflects emotional competence. Perhaps it is no accident that the individuals studied in Colby and Damon's (1992) case-oriented research on moral action and moral ideals were characterized by their commitment to truth-seeking, open-mindedness, compassion for others, flexibility toward change, and a sensitivity to "doing the right thing" in their daily lives and relationships with others. These adults demonstrated the sort of personal integrity that Blasi (1983) had earlier described as

characteristic of a moral self or identity, wherein one's self-concept is centrally defined by moral commitment. A moral self, entailing as it must a commitment to moral understanding and action, is synonymous with moral character.

The qualities noted previously by Wilson (1993) and others as being essential to moral disposition are not new; they are similar to and overlap with those espoused by Aristotle as constituting virtues (1985): Courage (which was also viewed as necessary for sustaining community), justice (fairness in equity, reciprocity, and impartiality), temperance (or self-control), and wisdom (a felt knowingness of what is a right choice). The philosophers Wilson (1993) and MacIntyre (1981) echo Aristotle in their analyses of what is significant about honorable character, and Wilson in particular relies on developmental theory and anthropological findings to buttress his claim that character lies at the heart of a balanced life that is well-lived. Walker and Hennig (1997) in their analysis of moral development as part of personality echo a similar theme; indeed, in reviewing their own and others' research on moral development (e.g., Haan, 1991; Walker, Pitts, Hennig, & Matsuba, 1995; Walker & Taylor, 1991) they emphasize that moral commitment and personal integrity are inextricable from one's social-emotional experience. I claim as well that such a balanced, well-lived life, characterized by personal integrity, is one that reflects mature emotional competence. I do not see how they can be separated from one another.

The idea that character is embedded in emotional competence also reveals that emotional competence is something we get better at as we mature. Young preschool children demonstrate sympathy, some degree of self-control (or compliance), and occasionally a sense of equity in their sharing. Duty, obligation, or conscience require more maturity, and this moral sense becomes evident in school-age children. But it is probably not until adolescence that we see an

emerging personal integrity that we call character. I suggest that it is with mature adolescents that we will begin to see well-developed emotional competence. Indeed, when we encounter immature adolescents (i.e., for their age, they are acting like younger children), we are apt to distrust their personal integrity. In short, their character is still unformed, and I wager our response to their emotional functioning will indicate that we experience them as less than emotionally competent. I think that the well-adjusted school-age child may be a good candidate for emotional competence as well, but because she has not yet gone through the challenges of puberty to her self-definition and emotional experience, I suggest instead that she is well on her way to demonstrating emotional competence, albeit not yet at a mature level.

The role of developmental history. As a social constructivist, my view of how developmental history affects emotional competence is one that emphasizes that we **learn** to give meaning to our context-dependent emotional experience via our social exposure to emotion discourse and narrative and our cognitive developmental capacities. In this sense, a social-constructivist approach to emotion is highly individualized: One's emotional experience is contingent on exposure to specific contexts, unique social history, and current cognitive developmental functioning, with this last component permitting us to transform our context by the very fact that we interact with it (Carpendale, 1997). Our unique social history includes our immersion in our culture's beliefs, attitudes, and assumptions, our observation of important others, and the patterns of reinforcement from those with whom we are significantly involved. All of these factors contribute to our learning what it means to feel something and then do something about it. The concepts we assign to emotional experience are saturated with nuance and context-dependent meaning, including the social roles we occupy, such as gender and age roles. In summary, emotions are inextricable from what has meaning for an individual, and what

is meaningful reflects cultural and moral values (Saarni, 1999).

A social constructivist view of emotional competence emphasizes one's own active creation of emotional experience, integrated as it is with one's cognitive developmental functioning and one's social experience. It is this feature of constructivism that differentiates it from the more commonly encountered term, "social construction of emotions" (Armon-Jones, 1986). The latter is related in that it proposes that all emotions are socio-cultural products, but it does not allow for the vagaries of human development nor the active transformation of context that occurs by virtue of our interaction with it. Indeed, chance encounters *are given meaning* and thus transformed by most western individuals through attributions such as "as luck would have it" or "little did I know that that day would change my life forever" or "I seized the moment" or "fate brought us together" or "bad things happen for a good reason: they make you appreciate life." Social constructivism, then, allows for chance and fortuity in development, whereas constructionism posits a more rigid handing down or internalization of cultural meanings and discourse (see relevant discussions by Bandura, 1998; Gergen, 1998; Krantz, 1998). With emotional competence we can embrace fortuitous events for the possibilities they extend to us; when these random events are destructive and traumatic, the emotionally competent (and thus resilient) response will be to approach one's recovery and subsequent life with an enriched view of our vulnerability to chance, both positive as well as negative. Hopefully, emotional self-efficacy, the final skill of emotional competence described below, is the outcome for those who survive trauma: They can learn to live and feel with greater awareness (Janoff-Bulman, 1998; Janoff-Bulman & Frantz, 1997).

Skills of emotional competence

With this rather lengthy introduction to the theoretical foundations of emotional

competence. I turn next to the skills that constitute emotional competence. It should be noted that we learn these skills in social contexts, and, as a consequence, the skills listed below should be understood as representing western cultural beliefs about emotional experience and may have limited generalizability to other cultures. These skills are presented in a sequence, but this sequence is **not** a developmental ordering of skills, rather one can observe proto-developmental manifestations of each skill. It is likely that not until late adolescence would one observe all of the skills being applied effectively and competently. However, given the significance of context, there will inevitably be situations in which we respond with relative emotional incompetence, in spite of our best efforts to cope effectively.

1. Awareness of one's emotional state, including the possibility that one is experiencing multiple emotions, and at even more mature levels, awareness that one might also not be consciously aware of one's feelings due to unconscious dynamics or selective inattention.

2. Ability to discern others' emotions, based on situational and expressive cues that have some degree of cultural consensus as to their emotional meaning.

3. Ability to use the vocabulary of emotion and expression terms commonly available in one's (sub-culture) and at more mature levels to acquire cultural scripts that link emotion with social roles.

4. Capacity for empathic and sympathetic involvement in others' emotional experiences.

5. Ability to realize that inner emotional state need not correspond to outer expression, both in oneself and in others, and at more mature levels the ability to understand that one's emotional-expressive behavior may impact on another and to take this into account in one's self-presentation strategies.

6. Capacity for adaptive coping with aversive or distressing emotions by using self-regulatory

strategies that ameliorate the intensity or temporal duration of such emotional states (e.g., "stress hardiness").

7. Awareness that the structure or nature of relationships is in part defined by both the degree of emotional immediacy or genuineness of expressive display and by the degree of reciprocity or symmetry within the relationship; e.g., mature intimacy is in part defined by mutual or reciprocal sharing of genuine emotions, whereas a parent-child relationship may have asymmetric sharing of genuine emotions.

8. Capacity for emotional self-efficacy: The individual views her or himself as feeling, overall, the way he or she wants to feel. That is, emotional self-efficacy means that one accepts one's emotional experience, whether unique and eccentric or culturally conventional, and this acceptance is in alignment with the individual's beliefs about what constitutes desirable emotional "balance." In essence, one is living in accord with one's personal theory of emotion when one demonstrates emotional self-efficacy that is integrated with one's moral sense.

Emotional Competence versus Emotional Intelligence

My final theoretical comments have to do with distinguishing emotional competence from the construct emotional intelligence. Curiously, "emotional intelligence" is often defined without reference to ethical values or one's ego identity (Goleman, 1995; Mayer & Salovey, 1997), and an individual's developmental history is typically given scant attention, if any. I include here Mayer and Salovey's (1997) definition of the construct emotional intelligence:

> "Emotional intelligence involves the ability to perceive accurately, appraise, and express emotion; the ability to access and/or generate feelings when they facilitate thought; the ability to understand emotion and emotional knowledge; and the ability to regulate emotions to promote emotional and intellectual growth" (p. 10).

The empirical work undertaken to measure those *abilities* that make up emotional intelligence has been with adult subjects, and I have drawn upon the 1998 article by Davies, Stankov, and Roberts (1998) in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* for my comments here. Davies and her colleagues evaluated 3 large samples of adults, giving them rather extensive batteries of tests to determine both the discriminant and the convergent validity of instruments designed to measure emotional intelligence. They included self-report instruments developed by Mayer and others that sought to measure various "abilities" of emotional information processing, specifically, the Toronto Alexithymia Scale (Bagby, Taylor, & Parker, 1994), the Trait Meta-Mood Scale (Salovey, Mayer, Goldman, Turvey, & Palfai, 1995), and the Affective Communication Scale (Friedman, Prince, Riggio, & DiMatteo, 1980)as well as an exploratory instrument designed to assess directly emotional perception and labeling of facial expressions, auditory tones, and colors. In addition, they used a wide variety of other instruments designed to get at cognitive aptitudes, verbal ability, social functioning, and personality variables. After their many analyses, Davies et al. concluded that all that really remained as a somewhat viable, albeit weak, measure of emotional intelligence was the instrument for assessing emotion perception through "correct" identification of facial expressions, and even that instrument suffered from low reliability. The self-report questionnaires all correlated quite substantively with existing personality tests, and thus it is not at all clear what the Alexithymia, Affective Communication, or Meta-Mood Scales contribute to our knowledge about the construct emotional intelligence that cannot be explained by personality traits such as extroversion, neuroticism, and agreeableness. Verbal ability correlated with the above mentioned scales as well.

Davies et al. concluded that perhaps the construct emotional intelligence is not really a mental aptitude and certainly not in the traditional psychometric view of intelligence. Their data

indicated that at present we do not have an adequate set of measures for evaluating those sorts of emotional and social skills outlined by Mayer and Salovey as constituting emotional intelligence.

From the perspective of a developmental psychologist, I would add that neither Davies et al., nor Mayer and Salovey, nor Goleman take into account the powerful role played by context and the self in an individual's emotional functioning. Emotional competence, according to how I have defined it, entails taking into account the individual's efficacy motivation for engaging in some emotion-eliciting encounter, the unique sorts of contextual demands and affordances available to that individual, and the values and beliefs the person brings to the emotional experience. Thus, a given measure or instrument could not possibly produce an outcome that said "this person A is more emotionally competent than person B," for this would disregard the transforming aspect of what happens when we interact with an emotionally affordant context: We change the context as a result.

A constructivist perspective suggests considerable fluidity in the moment to moment experience of people, and those who are concerned with narrative construction, meaning-making, or the process by which we create "storied selves" (McAdams, 1996) would probably say that emotional competence is much more of an ebb and flow process, not a trait that resides in the person. I suspect that it is something that we conclude after the fact, that we managed to function in an emotionally effective manner relative to our goals, but in the immediate emotion-laden challenge, we engage with a belief in our own emotional resilience. When that belief is fragile - because we are facing an unfamiliar context or emotional challenge - or poorly developed - because our unique social history has encumbered us with liabilities, then our emotional encounters are likely to result more often in ineffectual outcomes relative to our goals. Rest assured that all of us will experience emotional *in*competence at one time or another.

Consequences of Emotional Competence

I would like to conclude with a brief discussion of one of the consequences of emotional competence, namely, effective *skill in managing one's emotions*, which is critical to being able to negotiate one's way through interpersonal exchanges. Other important consequences of emotional competence are *a sense of subjective well-being* and adaptive *resilience* in the face of future stressful circumstances.

Coping scripts. We know that children learn emotion scripts for socially desirable coping strategies at a relatively young age (6-7 years) and with increasing maturity become more capable of providing more elaborated and contextualized justifications for strategic coping as well as expectations for how one would feel afterwards (Saarni, 1997). Similarly, older children take into account dyadic status differences, degree of affiliation, and intensity of felt emotion when considering hypothetical stressful encounters and how they would manage their emotional-expressive behavior in such hypothetical situations (Saarni, 1991). There is now a large body of social cognition research that documents children's script knowledge of how to manage one's emotional-expressive behavior when faced with challenging situations (reviewed by Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998), and generally speaking, what we have found out is that older children view both genuinely expressed emotional behavior as well as dissembled emotional behavior as regulated acts.

Observed management of emotional-expressive behavior. The number of studies which have collected observational data of children's attempts at managing their emotional-expressive behavior are considerably less in number than the preceding social cognition-oriented studies that examine children's script knowledge in hypothetical situations. I shall comment only on two here. A recent study of Marion Underwood (Underwood, Hurley, Johanson, & Mosley, in press)

examined how children coped with a provoking unfamiliar peer during a rigged computer game. She found unexpectedly that very few expressions of anger occurred during these interactions, despite the subject children being mocked and insulted by the confederate peer. Most often, the children retained a neutral expression or smiled; some of the girls looked mildly sad or giggled self-consciously (placatingly?). In short, these children managed their emotional-expressive behavior very prudently: They were faced with having to deal with an unknown kid, in a university laboratory, and probably realized they were being video-taped. Some children opted to terminate the computer game early, and interestingly, these children were somewhat disproportionately more likely to have been nominated by their classmates as being prone to aggressive behavior. But in this context they were neither aggressive nor expressive of anger. I can imagine that some might have thought to themselves, "who needs this?" relative to the onslaught of mild insults being directed at them, and thus they competently asserted their right to terminate the experiment.

The second study was conducted by myself and involved taping children interacting with an adult confederate, first when she was in a happy, cheerful state and then a week later when she was in a depressed state (Saarni, 1992). The children were asked by another adult to try to help cheer her up, and all agreed to do so. In this second session they had to be able to manage their emotional-expressive behavior when dealing with the depressed woman, and compared to the youngest children (6 years old), the older children (11-12 years old) demonstrated more composure and talked and smiled more, but they also showed more fidgety, tension-laden behavior. The youngest children were more likely to look distressed and upset, and the middle age group, 8-9 years, exhibited a curiously emotionally flat profile. I suspected they were just trying to endure the interaction as best they could.

What these two studies suggest is that children's management of their emotional-expressive behavior can be deemed emotionally competent *after the fact*. We can examine their behavior in "X" situation to see if it served them well *under the circumstances*. We may not be on such firm ground if we try to *predict ahead of time* whether a given child will behave emotionally competently or not (i.e., Underwood's aggressive children did *not* behave incompetently as might have been expected by their sociometric ratings). Emotional competence is dynamic; it is a judgment we make about particular behaviors in particular emotion-eliciting circumstances. Yet I also contend that judgments of mature emotional competence will be made when we view individuals as applying their moral principles to the emotion-eliciting circumstances and responding in accord with their moral sense. To some extent, this perspective on what constitutes mature emotional competence has appeared in the debate about our President's behavior as well as about the behavior of the law-makers and media figures who have sought to judge him. Humility may serve us best here: we will all get our comeuppance at one time or another and discover our personal zones of emotional incompetence.

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